

The New York Times

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May 23, 2010

OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

An Arsenal We Can All Live With

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THE Pentagon has now told the public, for the first time, precisely how many nuclear weapons the United States has in its arsenal: 5,113. That is exactly 4,802 more than we need.

Last week, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton testified before the Senate to advocate approval of the so-called New Start treaty, signed by President Obama and President Dmitri Medvedev of Russia last month. The treaty's ceiling of 1,550 warheads deployed on 700 missiles and bombers will leave us with fewer warheads than at any time since John F. Kennedy was president. Yet the United States could further reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons without sacrificing security. Indeed, we have calculated that the country could address its conceivable national defense and military concerns with only 311 strategic nuclear weapons. (While we are civilian Air Force employees, we speak only for ourselves and not the Pentagon.)

This may seem a trifling number compared with the arsenals built up in the cold war, but 311 warheads would provide the equivalent of 1,900 megatons of explosive power, or nine-and-a-half times the amount that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara argued in 1965 could incapacitate the Soviet Union by destroying "one-quarter to one-third of its population and about two-thirds of its industrial capacity."

Considering that we face no threat today similar to that of the Soviet Union 45 years ago, this should be more than adequate firepower for any defensive measure or, if need be, an offensive strike. And this would be true even if, against all expectations, our capacity was halved by an enemy's surprise first strike. In addition, should we want to hit an enemy without destroying its society, the 311 weapons would be adequate for taking out a wide range of "hardened targets" like missile silos or command-and-control bunkers.

The key to shrinking our nuclear arsenal so radically would be dispersing the 311 weapons on land, at sea and on airplanes to get the maximum flexibility and survivability.

Ideally, 100 would be placed on single-warhead intercontinental ballistic missiles, like the Minuteman III systems now in service. These missiles, which have pinpoint accuracy, are

scattered around the country in such a way that only one potential enemy, Russia, would have any chance of rendering the arsenal impotent with a surprise strike. (And it is likely that our unilateral cuts would entice Moscow, which has been retiring its systems at a fast clip in recent years, to follow suit.) Equally important, these missile sites are easily detected and monitored, which would reassure our friends and provide a credible threat to our enemies.

The sea leg of the plan would involve placing 24 Trident D-5 missiles, each with a single nuclear warhead, on each of our Ohio-class submarines. Today's fleet of 14 can be cut to 12, with eight on patrol at a given time, together carrying 192 missiles ready to launch. The Tridents are extremely effective, as they can be moved around the globe on the submarines, cannot be easily detected, and present a risk to even hardened targets. And should any of our allies feel that our cuts in seaborne missiles are worrisome, we can remind them that the British and French will keep their complementary nuclear capabilities in the Atlantic.

Finally, for maximum flexibility in our nuclear arsenal, each of our B-2 stealth bombers could carry one air-launched nuclear cruise missile. While we have 20 such bombers, we assume that one would be undergoing repairs at any given time, giving us the final 19 warheads in our 311-missile plan. Our B-2 fleet is more than adequate for nuclear escalation control and political signaling, and giving it an exclusive role in our nuclear strategy would allow us to convert all our B-52H bombers to a conventional role, which is far more likely to be of use in our post-cold-war world.

While 311 is a radical cut from current levels, it is not the same as zero, nor is it a steppingstone to abandoning our nuclear deterrent. The idea of a nuclear-weapon-free world is not an option for the foreseeable future. Nuclear weapons make leaders vigilant and risk-averse. That their use is to be avoided does not render them useless. Quite the opposite: nuclear weapons might be the most politically useful weapons a state can possess. They deter adversaries from threatening with weapons of mass destruction the American homeland, United States forces abroad and our allies and friends. They also remove the incentive for our allies to acquire nuclear weapons for their own protection.

We need a nuclear arsenal. But we certainly don't need one that is as big, expensive and unnecessarily threatening to much of the world as the one we have now.

How Much is
Too Much?

Can ~~there~~ we have
Too Many Warheads?

Yes. What we
have — or $\frac{1}{10}$ of it
 $\frac{1}{5}$?

300 is Too many — for
France + for us!
+ Russia!

2 bags in a gas-sealed room —